



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Physical Activity and Aging

Every weekday morning at 4:30 a.m, 55-year-old Hope Ladipo starts her morning routine. As a third grade school teacher, she has to be at school by 7 a.m. However, before she starts her workday she and her husband go to the local "Y". "It's something we do together. It's a good way to share something," she says. So, she takes a change of clothes with her so she can go to work from there. If the weather is good, they head straight for the track. "I walk...that's the main thing. It's fun. If it's raining, I use the treadmill. I can walk a mile in about 13 minutes."

African-American women, as with all women, tend to not get enough exercise or physical activity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that 60 percent of women in the U.S. do not do enough physical activity. You tend to get busier as you get older and having an exercise routine may not have a high priority in your life. But the African-American woman's risk for developing heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer increases as she ages. The good news is physical activity, along with a healthy diet, can greatly reduce the chances of developing these chronic health problems.

In fact, you benefit tremendously by being physically active throughout your life. "Exercise offsets the maturing body's trend toward muscle weaknesses, bone fragility, loss of sense of balance, and slowing reaction time," reports Urschia Mahring, Doctor of Chiropractic, of Alexandria, Virginia. "Exercise protects us from potential injury by maintaining or developing strength, balance, flexibility, and bone density. A simple fall for an older person may result in a fractured hip, which may bring on the end of an independent lifestyle for that person."

It is never too late to start. "You can always improve your fitness, at any age and from any starting point. It is one of the miracles of the human body. Improved fitness increases your sense of well-being and your general health. You feel better and look better," says Dr. Mahring. "The aging body experiences decreasing muscle mass, bone mass, flexibility and balance and diminishing sensory input. But, exercise offsets these developments."

Almost everyone can engage in some physical activity. But if you have a chronic disease such as arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease or

diabetes or if you're over 50 and plan to do vigorous activity, talk to your doctor before you start. Your exercise routine doesn't necessarily have to be a formal one, nor does it have to be strenuous. However, it should be something you enjoy doing and something you do consistently, preferably at the same time every day. We all need three types of exercise:

- stretching to maintain/gain flexibility and tone;
- weight bearing for strengthening and bone density protection (any activity in which your feet and legs carry your own weight such as walking, running, jumping rope, dancing, team sports, racquet sports, skating, hiking, etc. Exercise makes your bones work harder, which helps them to build up bone mass; little or no physical activity can result in a loss of bone mass, putting people at risk for osteoporosis or broken bones); and
- aerobic for cardiovascular health (aerobic exercises use the body's large muscle groups in continuous, rhythmic, sustained movement and require oxygen for the production of energy. Regular aerobic exercise will improve the ability of your heart, lungs, blood vessels and associated tissues to use oxygen to produce energy needed for activity, and you'll build a healthier body while getting rid of excess body fat. Jogging, brisk walking, swimming, biking, cross-country skiing and aerobic dancing are some popular forms of aerobic exercise).

You can do one or all of these every day.

## **Getting Started**

Start out slow, 5 to 10 minutes a day. Then gradually add 3 to 4 minutes each week until you reach 30 to 35 minutes each day (or more). Find an activity that is suited for you. There are so many to choose from, there's bound to be something that is just right for you to fit into your daily routine. And that's the key—making exercise a part of your daily life. Some people have several activities that they alternate between on different days.

"I walk, but I also do strength building with weights," explains Mrs. Ladipo. "I want to stretch the muscles and keep the flexibility in my arms."

Here are some ways to get started and activities to try:

- Do stretches while you're still in bed, before you get up.
- Practice desk stretches if you work in an office and are sitting down a lot.

- Take the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Park a little further than you normally would when going to the store or the mall.
- Dance while doing household chores (turn up the music!)
- Practice standing on your toes to improve your balance and walk around the house on your toes doing housework.
- Get some workout videotapes or DVDs—there are many aerobic, stretching, dancing or yoga tapes that you can use to fit your schedule. Start out slow, you don't have to keep up with them or do everything they show you at first.
- Ride a bike (outdoors or even get a stationary one for home).
- If you like group activities (a great way to take care of yourself, feel good, and meet people), here are some ideas you may want to explore.
  - Join a gym; take classes at a local "Y"; contact your state or county park and recreation office for inexpensive classes.
  - Call your local community center, hospitals or universities for fitness activities; or the shopping mall for walking programs or clubs. Or, start your own walking club with a friend, relative or neighbor. Take walks in the neighborhood, local park or the mall. Many malls open earlier than the stores and you can walk around the mall without a crowd. It can sometimes be easier to exercise with other people to keep you motivated.

**"Age ain't nothing but a number!"** is a popular African American adage. It is used in many situations, but the message behind the saying is always the same: Don't define or limit a person by their age. In other words, age doesn't have anything to do with what you can do! And when it comes to staying healthy and taking care of oneself, being active is critical.

So, get moving. Take a lesson from Mrs. Ladipo. "You get energized from exercising. When you have things to do, you get up to speed; you move faster, you get things done. Once you put your legs on the floor, it's good."

Check out these additional resources on physical activity and exercise for older people and start your journey on a path to better health.

- The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, [www.os.dhhs.gov](http://www.os.dhhs.gov), 202-690-9000
- National Institute on Aging, [www.nih.gov/nia](http://www.nih.gov/nia), 800-222-2225
- 50-Plus Fitness Association, [www.50plus.org](http://www.50plus.org), 650-323-6160

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), 1-888-232-4674.

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